

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 149 338

CS 203 845

AUTHOR Osborn, Michael
 TITLE The Hidden Traps of Language: Dangerous Metaphors.
 PUB DATE Nov 74
 NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (64th, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 28-30, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Audiences; Literary Conventions; *Metaphors; *Persuasive Discourse; *Rhetoric; Rhetorical Criticism; Speech Communication; *Speeches; Verbal Communication

ABSTRACT

Since ancient times, the use of metaphor in rhetorical speeches has been a powerful tool for persuasive impact on audiences. Study of 84 important persuasive speeches, from classic to modern, reveals 52 metaphor types. Among these, 11 types account for 60% of all of the examples. These "archetypal" metaphors are used in speeches, not because of tradition or fashion, but because they have unusual capacities for persuasive effects. In order of frequency, these types are the human body, war and peace, light and darkness, structures, the sea, animals, literary tradition, the family, religious myths, sports, and personification. Experiments measuring audience response to speeches with both metaphorical and nonmetaphorical endings show that (1) the audience preferred the metaphorical ending and (2) the speaker was judged favorably or unfavorably (in terms of intellect, competence, and so on) according to the metaphor used. While metaphors have a definite place in rhetorical expression, these findings indicate a need to develop awareness of key metaphors and their potential for abuse. (MAI)

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THE HIDDEN TRAPS OF LANGUAGE: DANGEROUS METAPHORS

by

Michael Osborn
Department of Speech and Drama
Memphis State University
Memphis, Tennessee 38152

It is good to be back with you again, and to rediscover that we do share common scholarly interests, this time in the abuse of ordinary, everyday language. I quickly found that my announced title, "The Hidden Traps of Language," was so ambitious that I would have to use Doublespeak myself in order to get through it. There are simply too many traps, many of them rather blatant and brazen as well as hidden. So I hope you don't mind if I narrow my attention to a subject Aristotle called the most important element in the rhetorical use of language.¹

There is no more doubt among reasonable men that metaphor can be an extremely persuasive language form. Modern experiment has now joined with ancient theory in agreement on this point.² Experimenters have found for example that when a richly developed metaphor appears in the conclusions of persuasive speeches, such speeches will have more impact than when the same speeches are delivered with equivalent non-metaphorical endings.

It is also apparent that persuaders, when speaking at critical moments in history, have tended to put their money upon certain metaphor-types as offering the most promise for persuasive impact. I

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have isolated the major metaphors in 84 important persuasive speeches from ancient to modern times. The research has yielded 354 significant instances of metaphor, which are accounted for by 52 metaphor types ranging from "animals" to "woods and forests." Among these types 11 account for 60% of all specimens. In order of frequency, these types are the human body, war and peace, light and darkness, structures, the sea, animals, literary tradition, the family, religious myth, sports, and personification (which I regard as metaphor). Presumably these types, which I called "archetypal" in an earlier speculative paper before this descriptive work was concluded,³ are popular not simply because of rhetorical fashion and tradition, but because rhetors sense that they have unusual capacities for persuasive effects.

I don't wish to appear before you to berate metaphor because it is analogical rather than logical. I believe that metaphor can serve a healthy function in discourse when it animates and humanizes its subject-matter, reminds us of the essential oneness of things, and by its vividness and energy impels us to act when we ought to act towards worthy ends by worthy means.⁴ But surely we ought to be just a bit wary when metaphor, as the only differential in otherwise identical persuasive speeches, can lure us into attitude changes. In the earlier experiment I mentioned, test audiences heard two speeches, one ~~against~~^{against} protective tariff, the other opposing government aid to needy college students. The first speech had an extended sexual metaphor in its conclusion and an alternative conclusion like in all respects except that it was non-figurative. The second speech

against government aid concluded with a vivid death metaphor and a like non-metaphorical conclusion. The different versions of both speeches, tape recorded, were presented to college audiences, which are supposedly more critical than the general populace, by speakers who were identified as college professors.

Both speeches were conspicuously more persuasive when they carried the metaphorical endings. Moreover, the "professor" who used the sexual metaphor rose in the esteem of his audiences when he used the metaphor. But the "professor" who used the death metaphor fell in the eyes of his audience, even though they were swept along by the metaphor. The latter result ought especially to frighten us, I believe. It suggests that the persuasive power of metaphor can be so strong that it can seduce an audience's judgment even as they are deciding that the speaker himself is less trustworthy, competent, and intelligent than they had thought. On how many actual life occasions, and with what disastrous consequences, have audiences gone along with a rhetorician because of his word-magic, despite their better judgment of his ability and character!

For the remainder of this talk I would like to focus upon dangerous potentials among certain of the archetypes, lines of possible development which unscrupulous men could use to cloud our judgments and pervert our actions. Let us consider first the sea metaphor when it occurs in that traditional form, the ship-of-state. Speakers can say that society is launched upon a troubled, uncertain ocean. Now picturing society as a storm-tossed ship, they can extend the metaphor into a valiative conclusion, that citizens ought

to buckle down and do their duties like good crewmen. Such a metaphoric conception is not favorable to civil liberties, to rebels and other misfits who don't like to row along with others. Freedom of speech is rarely practised on board a ship. And above all, nowhere is there a more authoritarian image than that of the sea captain. I would say that the innocent-looking, picturesque sea metaphor is capable of grand abuses, and that in the hands of unscrupulous rhetoricians it can move the public mind towards an acceptance of fascist values.⁵

Or let's take the old disease and remedy metaphoric combination, one of the most popular uses of the human body archetype. The speaker sees society as sick and diseased, the illness may appear terminal, radical surgery is called for. The image is decidedly revolutionary. The implied image of the speaker links the power of metaphor with the appeal of one of the most favored symbols of our culture, that of the physician. God help us, as Edmund Burke said far more eloquently, if he turns out to be a quack!⁶

Take again war and peace. In our military-minded society we just love to be declaring war on something, and if a nation won't serve, we'll settle for an abstraction. Thus LBJ happily initiated a "War on Poverty," and WIN buttons signal the recruits in President Ford's army against inflation. The problem with the war metaphor is that it promises too much for us. We have learned that America wins wars quickly, and we have little patience for prolonged conflict. Woe then to the insensitive rhetorician who uses the war metaphor to launch a long and complicated program. He may lose because he is winning too slowly, and many good programs may go down with him. By

this same line of reasoning Harry Truman was no doubt correct when, confronting a long and uncertain struggle in Korea, he decided to call that actual conflict a "police action" rather than a war. Some might call this dishonest euphemism, but it reduced the pressure on old Harry to win at all costs and by any means, even atomic means. The leader who declares metaphorical war becomes of course a General, and "General" may enjoy just a bit too much favor as a symbol to give us comfort. Moreover, Generals enjoy a latitude of power only slightly less than the captain of a ship, and the image, in that it organizes and galvanizes society, may hold some danger for an order which prides itself on freedom--tolerance for those who on principle don't want to be drafted into society's latest army against its latest foe.⁷

Consider finally light and darkness. It is the most egotistical image of all. The speaker sees all in darkness, but promises to bring the light. At its worst the image says more or less obviously: "I am the Dawn. I am the Sun." We need not feel smug, because history tells us that many will bow down. And more men have happily died for metaphors than for the best reasons logic could produce.⁸ One could go on. In times of war we have a wonderful tendency to picture the enemy in animalistic terms. This helps us get over any Christian scruples we may feel about killing. There is no ethical injunction in our culture against killing animals, especially vicious animals. And if we have any lingering reservations about mass murder in war, the indirect contrast effect--if they are Animals with a capital A then we must be Men with a capital M--reassures us of our own humanity.⁹

Ever since I began playing with metaphors I have been alternately fascinated and repelled. Perhaps this paper will explain why. I don't urge that we abolish metaphors: obviously I couldn't get along without them, and I doubt that many of you would want our mental and spiritual lives reduced to logic-chopping. But I do believe we should develop in ourselves and our students a healthy wariness of key metaphors and their potential for abuse. Perhaps it will prepare us better for the Age of Doublespeak.

Notes

¹Poetics 22, 1459^a, trans. Ingram Bywater, The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 255.

²See John Waite Bowers and Michael M. Osborn, "Attitude Effects of Selected Types of Concluding Metaphors in Persuasive Speeches," Speech Monographs, 33 (June 1966), 147-55 (rpt. Serge Moscovici, ed., The Psychosociology of Language (Chicago: Markham, 1972), pp. 442-453. This experiment was followed by studies which confirmed its findings on metaphor's persuasiveness. See J. C. McCroskey and W. H. Combs, "The Effects of the Use of Analogy on Attitude Change and Source Credibility," Journal of Communication, 19 (December 1969), 333-339; and N. Lamar Reinsch, Jr., "An Investigation of the Effects of the Metaphor and Simile in Persuasive Discourse," Speech Monographs, 38 (June 1971), 142-145.

³"Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: The Light-Dark Family," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 53 (April 1967), 115-126.

⁴I analyzed this process of metaphoric action in "The Metaphor in Public Address," Speech Monographs, 29 (Aug. 1962), 223-234 (with Douglas Ehninger).

⁵For significant uses of the rhetorical sea metaphor see Daniel Webster's "Reply to Hayne," Demosthenes' "The Third Philippic," Edmund Burke's "On American Taxation" and "On the Nabob of Arcot's Debts," and Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Exposition Address."

⁶Disease-cure images are used notably in Burke's "Previous to the Bristol Election" and "On the East India Bill of Mr. Fox," and in Demosthenes' "Olynthiac II" and "On the Crown." Kenneth Burke analyzes the power of Hitler's rhetoric in terms of "curatives" offered by a "medicine-man" in an admirable essay, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'," The Philosophy of Literary Form, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 191-220.

⁷Some notable images of war appear in William Jennings Bryan's "The Cross of Gold," Franklin Roosevelt's "First Inaugural," Burke's "On American Taxation," the Venerable Bede's "On the Nativity of St. Peter and St. Paul," and Adlai Stevenson's "Speech in Acceptance of the Democratic Party Presidential Nomination, 1952."

⁸Striking examples of light-dark imagery are seen in Henry Grady's "The New South," William Pitt's "On the Abolition of the Slave Trade," Edmund Burke's "Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs," Daniel Webster's "Bunker Hill Memorial Address," and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream."

⁹Significant animal imagery occurs in Jonathan Edward's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Burke's "On American Taxation," "On the Nabob of Arcot's Debts," and "On the East India Bill of Mr. Fox," and Richard Sheridan's "Speech Against Warren Hastings."